THE GOOD LIFE: SMALLER IS BETTER

Are people in rural areas or small towns really more satisfied with their communities than people in larger urban areas? Previous research says they are. Nationwide studies have consistently shown that as city size increases, people report less and less satisfaction with their communities. A recent survey of Nebraskans shows that the majority would prefer to live in either a town under 10,000 population or in a rural area.[1] These results are very similar to those of similar national studies indicating that the majority of people, including those living in very large metropolitan areas, would prefer to live in small towns.

The question that prompts this report is the degree to which community size is associated with community satisfaction and quality of life within the state of Nebraska. Unlike the rest of the nation, the majority of Nebraskans are in fact living in smaller communities. They are also consistently happier and more satisfied with life than the rest of the nation.[2] The question is whether this satisfaction is evenly distributed or whether the farm and small town communities in Nebraska offer a more satisfactory environment than our larger cities.

[1]Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey unpublished report.

[2]Comparisons made in 1978 show that 56 percent of Nebraskans report a great deal of satisfaction with their communities as opposed to 47 percent nationwide. Note that this question was worded differently in the survey reported here and hence produces a somewhat different measure of satisfaction.

The data for this report are taken from the 1980 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. In the 1980 survey a representative sample of 1915 Nebraskans was asked questions regarding the quality of life in Nebraska. Among these were various questions dealing with city size, quality of life, and other factors related to community satisfaction.

A subjective measure of community satisfaction was obtained by simply asking, "How satisfied are you with your present community?" In addition to this summary measure, two additional aspects of quality of life are included in this report: one question measured whether the respondent was afraid to walk alone at night near their home and the other, whether they had been a victim of either a personal or property crime in the past year.

Community size was divided into six categories: rural farm, places under 2,500, cities of 2,500-10,000, cities of 10,001-50,000 persons, Lincoln, and Omaha. Other factors known to be related to community satisfaction such as length of residence, age, race, education, and marital status are also included in this report.

FINDINGS

Are rural people more satisfied with their community than urban dwellers? Our data indicate that rural people are indeed more satisfied (see Table 1). With the exception of Lincoln our data indicate that, as community size increases, satisfaction decreases. Table 1 shows a gradual decline from 51.2 percent of rural people who are very satisfied with their

community to only 37.8 percent of individuals in the state's largest metropolitan area who are very satisfied.

The data in Table 1 also indicate that the percentage of people who have not been the victim of crime decreases as community size increases. Furthermore, we find a strong and consistent relationship between community size and fear of walking alone at night near one's home: while fully 91.4 percent of individuals on the farm are unafraid to walk alone at night near their home, only 51.0 percent of those in Omaha are comfortable walking after dark in their neighborhood.

Overall, the three indicators support the generalization that community size affects community satisfaction and quality of life. There are a variety of explanations for this relationship. One popular explanation of the dissatisfaction of big-city dwellers is that it is the sheer size of the city, with its inevitably greater diversity and anonymity, which lies at the root of this dissatisfaction. Another kind of explanation suggests that it is the kind of people who live in a city that leads to higher overall levels of dissatisfaction. That is, perhaps the kinds of people who are apt to reside disproportionately in larger cities (ethnic minorities, single, geographically mobile, and young people) are also more apt to be dissatisfied wherever they live. In this case, it would be the different composition of the population in larger vs. small communities which affect levels of satisfaction rather than the sheer numbers of people.

Differences in Population Composition by City Size:

In testing this "kinds of people" hypothesis, we focus on six background

characteristics of the respondents which vary systematically by community size: length of residence, age, race, education, marital status and income. We found that, in general, the larger the community, the more likely the residents were to be: 1) younger; 2) better educated; 3) better off financially (farmers and ranchers are an exception to this generalization); 4) newcomers to their neighborhood; 5) non-white; 6) single or divorced.

Effect of Composition on Community Satisfaction:

This brings us to the question of whether it is these differences in the kinds of people who live in small as opposed to large towns that gives rise to differences on satisfaction. This question can be answered by examining overall levels of satisfaction by these six background factors. If the characteristics associated with large cities are also associated with low satisfaction, then it may be that composition is an important factor in the relationship between city size and community satisfaction.

From the data in Table 2 we see that length of residence, age, race, marital status and income are associated with the summary indicator of community satisfaction. The data indicate that the older one is and the longer the individual has lived in one place, the more satisfied he or she is with it. The data also indicate a substantial difference by race: 46.9 percent of whites are satisfied with their community whereas only 32.1 percent of non-whites are satisfied.

The data in Table 2 on education and income are somewhat surprising: the higher the income and educational attainment of our respondents, the more community satisfaction they expressed. While this makes intuitive

sense--they have, after all, better housing, greater access to cultural events, better standards of living, and greater community involvement, previous national studies have consistently shown that the poorer and the less educated segments of the population express the greatest satisfaction. This finding from past research is probably due to the fact that the poorest and the least educated are also the oldest--a group that we have already noted expresses greater satisfaction. The discrepancy between our findings and earlier ones may be due in part to the generally high levels of education among all Nebraskans, thus breaking down the old close association between age and education.

The data indicate that 55.5 percent of individuals who are widowed are very satisfied with their community followed by married people and individuals with disrupted marriages. The least satisfied with their community are the never married. Age may very well be a factor. As we have already seen older people are most satisfied and young people are the least satisfied with their communities. It would seem logical that the majority of widowed individuals would fall into the over 60 category while the majority of never married would fall into the 18-29 years old category.

The other two columns in Table 2 show that age, race, education, marital status, and income are also associated with rates of victimization and feelings of safety. Looking at these panels we see that the younger one is, the more educated one is, and the wealthier one is, the more likely one is to have been a victim of either a personal or a property crime in the past year yet the less likely one is to feel afraid. Clearly

these two indicators of quality of life operate independently. In fact, the association between fear and sex is so strong that it is probably so.

Summarizing Table 2 we can conclude that the "kinds of people" explanation has some validity. Ethnic minorities, young people, unmarried and geographically mobile people--all of whom are found disproportionately in larger cities--are least satisfied with their communities and most apt to have been a victim of a crime. On the other hand, the well off and the well educated, while they are more likely to have been a crime victim, are among the most satisfied with their communities. Being fearful of walking in one's neighborhood is so strongly tied to age and sex (42.7% of females but only 10.5% of males are afraid) that it is probably not fair to make any conclusion about its association with income or racial status without a control for age and sex.

Relative Effect of Community Size and Personal Characteristics on Community Satisfaction

The evidence we have just reviewed shows that, in general, the larger the size of the community, the less satisfied will be its residents and the more likely they will be to have been the victim of a personal or property crime. Also, without exception, the larger the city, the greater the likelihood that residents will be afraid to walk at night in their neighborhoods. This evidence suggests that both objective and subjective quality of life suffer in larger cities. On the other hand, we have provided evidence to show that the kinds of people who are disproportionately, but not exclusively, found in larger cities--the geographically mobile,

unattached young people, ethnic minorities--are least satisfied and most apt to be crime victims no matter where they live.

The question to which we finally turn then is an evaluation of the relative impact of these two kinds of factors in determining quality of life. In particular we are concerned with knowing whether the strong association between community size and quality of life holds up after we take into consideration the different composition of small and larger communities. In order to answer these questions, we will examine the relationship between quality of life and each of the factors we have looked at while statistically controlling for all of the other variables. The data are presented in Table 3. Two of the personal background variables, education and length of residence, are omitted because they are not significantly related to either community satisfaction or the quality of life indicators.

In Table 3 we see that, after taking population composition into account, there is still a strong relationship between community size and quality of life as measured by fear of walking in one's neighborhood and reported satisfaction with one's community. The larger the community, the less satisfaction and security is expressed. This relationship is much weaker in the case of victimization from crime. Cities over 10,000 seem to have more crime than cities under 10,000, but aside from this gross distinction, there is no pattern of increasing crime with increasing population. Even after controlling for population composition, Lincoln still records a higher community satisfaction than one would expect for

its size. Other than this anomaly, Nebraska seems to conform to the national pattern of higher quality of life in smaller communities.

When the other background factors are examined under control for community size and the other measures of population composition, we find that most of them have the same relationship to community satisfaction and quality of life that we saw in Table 2. The major change is the effect of racial status on quality of life. The results in Table 3 suggest that after controlling for differences in education, income, and community size, there is very little difference between blacks and whites in community satisfaction and quality of life. Non-whites are still a little less satisfied with their community and a little more afraid to be out in their neighborhoods at night, but these differences are much smaller than before. The controls for age and sex also considerably reduce the differences in community satisfaction and quality of life among marital status groupings. In Table 3 only relatively minor differences are noted among marital statuses and widows no longer stand out as extremely satisfied or extremely afraid.

Summarizing this table we can conclude that community size has an independent effect on community satisfaction and quality of life. After statistically controlling for differing population composition, we find that community satisfaction and quality of life tend to deteriorate as communities get larger. Size of community is not, however, the sole determinant. This analysis suggests that particular background characteristics such as age, sex, and income also have a strong independent effect

on satisfaction and quality of life.

DISCUSSION

How does our data answer our original question: Are people in rural areas and small towns really more satisfied with their communities than people in larger urban areas? From our analysis our answer would be a qualified yes, the smaller the community size the more satisfied, safe and secure the individual feels.

Lincoln was often an exception to the findings. Individuals in Lincoln were quite satisfied with their community and showed a lower victimization rate. Precisely why Lincoln did not conform to the pattern can only be speculated on in this report. It may well be because Lincoln is a center of city, county, and state government as well as the home of the state's largest post-secondary educational institution. Lincoln also includes a number of research facilities. All of these amenities in a moderate-sized city may provide a unique combination with some of the advantages of a really large city with few of its attendent problems.

In summary we can conclude that community size does have an effect on community satisfaction in Nebraska. It is not, however, the only determinant of community satisfaction. Certain personal characteristics which the individual brings with himself or herself to that community also affect the level of community satisfaction. We have seen that age, sex, and income in particular affect both community satisfaction and general life satisfaction. These findings suggest that a move to a smaller

town will not necessarily provide greater satisfaction or security nor a move to a large city necessarily lead to dissatisfaction. Therefore community satisfaction is actually a composite made up of both community size and individual background characteristics.

TABLE 1. COMMUNITY SATISFACTION AND QUALITY OF LIFE INDICATORS BY COMMUNITY SIZE.

	Percent Very Satisfied	Percent No Crime	Percent Unafraid	Total Number
Community Size:				
Farm	51%	84%	91%	244
Places under 2,500	50	86	84	449
City of 2,500 - 10,000	43	86	76	245
City of 10,001 - 50,000	43	77	68	292
Lincoln	58	81	59	189
Omaha	38	74	51	450

TABLE 2. COMMUNITY SATISFACTION AND QUALITY OF LIFE INDICATORS BY BACKGROUND VARIABLES.

	Percent Very Satisfied	Percent No Crime	Percent Unafraid	Total Number
Length of Residence:				
0-5 years	41%	75%	74%	205
6-10 years	41	81	68	123
11-15 years	34	78	76	113
16-20 years	45	77	63	78
21 years or more	50	82	70	731
Age:				
17-29	36	74	74	511
30-44	45	78	81	491
45-59	47	82	70	358
Over 60	58	90	59	504
Race:				
White	47	81	72	1776
Non-White	32	77	54	83
Education:				
Less than high school	46	85	64	390
High school diploma	44	80	74	1103
Junior college	49	81	76	86
Bachelor's degree	52	79	70	206
Master's degree	52	73	68	81
Sex:				
Male	44	81	90	360
Female	48	81	57	518
Marital Status:*				
Married	47	80	77	1206
Widowed	56	90	50	243
Never married	31	77	70	280
Disrupted marriages	46	78	64	140
Income:				
Less than 9,999	43	83	61	551
10,000 - 19,999	43	80	75	614
20,000 - 29,999	49	79	78	394
Greater than 30,000	56	78	74	198

*Disrupted marriages include all respondents who are divorced, separated and married living apart.

TABLE 3. INDEPENDENT EFFECT OF CITY SIZE AND RESPONDENT'S BACKGROUND ON COMMUNITY SATISFACTION AND QUALITY OF LIFE.*

	Percent Very Satisfied	Percent No Crime	Percent Unafraid
Total	46	80	71
City size:			
Farm	50	82	90
Places under 2,500	49	84	86
2,500 - 10,000	42	84	79
10,001 - 50,000	43	76	67
Lincoln	61	81	57
Omaha	39	75	50
Age:			
17-29	38	73	75
30-44	42	77	80
45-59	48	81	69
Over 60	61	89	59
Race:			
White	46	80	71
Non-white	42	83	64
Sex:			
Male	45	81	88
Female	46	79	58
Marital Status:			
Married	46	80	73
Widowed	50	81	66
Never married	40	81	66
Disrupted marriages	48	78	75
Income:			
Less than 9,999	40	80	70
10,000 - 19,999	45	80	72
20,000 - 29,999	52	81	73
Greater than 30,000	56	77	69

*The effect of each variable in this table has been statistically adjusted to control for the simultaneous effects of all the other variables in the table.

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1980 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1.	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1980 NASIS. Lynn K. White. Price: $7.50.
2.	Status of Women in Nebraska. Susan Welch and Alan Booth. Price: $1.00.
3.	Congressional District and Planning Region Databook for the State of Nebraska. Lynn K. White. Price: $1.50.
4.	Nebraskans and Their Local Government. Susan Welch and Alan Booth. Price: $ .75.
5.	Migration in Nebraska: Movers and Stayers 1977-79. Lynn K. White. Price: $ .75.
6.	Nebraskans and Their University. David Brinkerhoff and Alan Booth. Price: $ .75.
7.	Nebraskans and Educational Pluralism. Helen Moore. Price: $1.00.
8.	Nebraskans and State Water Policy: An Update. Susan Welch. Price: $ .75.
9.	Food for Thought: Nebraskans Views on the Food Tax and Other State and Local Taxes. Susan Welch. Price: $ .75.
10.	Nebraskans View the Recession. Alan Booth and Lynn K. White. Price: $ .75.